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ABSTRACT

There is a great need for bilingual/bicultural education, especially for Spanish-speaking students, who now number approximately three million in United States elementary and secondary schools. One educational experience for such students has been the presentation of bilingual plays in several of the New York City schools. Beginning with a play in English with Spanish dialogue interpolated in places appropriate to the action, the productions moved on to an original rock musical for children, "What's Happenin', Man?" with a predominately Puerto Rican and black cast. Another original play, a Latin/rock musical titled "A Donde Vas?" with a theme loosely adapted from "Everyman," is to be performed in 1975. In these plays, it is essential that bilingual children be able to identify with their unique heritage through characters, situations, dialogue, and acting which are authentic to their culture. (JM)

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AN APPROACH TO WRITING BILINGUAL PLAYS FOR CHILDREN

Gordon A. Jacoby

In order to place in proper context the specialized work in playwriting for children that I have been doing, I must give you some background.

One of the outstanding new phenomena in education today in the major population centers of the country is bilingual education. I should note parenthetically that bilingualism in this country is most commonly associated with native Spanish speakers, but there are also thousands of Indians, Chinese, and other native speakers who can benefit from bilingual education. My work in New York City has, however, been limited to Spanish-speaking children.

For some time, educators have realized that children in whose homes English is not the dominant language have great difficulty succeeding in school when they are thrust into a totally English-speaking environment. Increasingly, they have recognized the need of children who have verbal skills in a language other than English to be taught initially in that language and introduced gradually to English. They have also become aware of the need for such children to be taught about the culture associated with their dominant language. Recently, the Federal government and State governments have been giving more and more attention to the need for bilingual education. A bilingual conference in 1967 resulted in the passage of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 which authorized the spending of 400 million dollars on bilingual education programs. To date only 35 million dollars have been spent, mainly because of a paucity of trained teachers to staff the programs, the lack of appropriate textbooks, and

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minimal information on teaching techniques. At another conference in 1973, participants urged that more local, state, and federal support be given for programs for non-English speaking and bilingual children. Support was urged in particular for programs for Spanish-speaking children, since the United States now has the fifth largest concentration of Spanish-speaking persons in the western hemisphere. The numbers have grown so rapidly that the United States is now one of the major Spanish-American countries, and continued growth is predicted. There are now approximately three million Spanish-speaking students in grades K through 12.

Rupert Trujillo, Chairman of the federally funded National Education Task Force De La Raza, has stated publicly that innovative bilingual/bicultural educational changes would serve the whole of American Public Education by

1. Enriching and preserving the cultural resources of a people;
2. Creating better human relationships among ethnic groups;
3. Creating for the child an atmosphere of personal identification, self-worth and achievement.

The National Education Association reinforced this position in its recent resolutions calling for"educational materials that portray our cultural diversity", and "bilingual education as needed".

The preceding information had little meaning for me personally until I accepted the responsibility for directing a children's theatre production during my first year of teaching at The City College, in 1971. I was attracted to the idea of doing children's plays for the community because I felt that the audience was there. On the other hand, although I am a native New Yorker,

I had not yet made contact with either the community or the university. Meanwhile, I had decided to direct a published play, The Hide and Seek Odyssey of Madeline Gimple, by Frank Gagliano. While working on this play but before I had cast the show, I made contact with the principals of three elementary schools which almost abut the College. One principal, whose school is predominantly bilingual, was enthusiastic about my project and had already developed plans to include theatre in his curriculum. While I was being shown around the school, the thought of a Spanish-English children's play struck me as a fascinating possibility. As it happened, Mirian Colon, the Puerto Rican actress, was working with me as an Artist-in Residence in my acting class. I approached her with my idea and she immediately offered to translate Madeline Gimple into Spanish. It all seemed so simple- a made-to-order translation. But as soon as I saw the translation interpolated into the script, I became aware of problems. The first one is apparent from a short passage:

Madeline

Si, me encanta. I love it. Me gusta
mas que nada. I love it more than anything.

Litterman

Then why are you running away?
Entonces porque quieres irte?

The problem was that this attempt at making the play bilingual was a word-for-word translation. It was really two plays, and would require twice the playing time. This problem would be solved, to some extent by cutting, but a more serious difficulty remained. The Spanish dialogue seemed alien to the setting

and some of the characters, yet not as foreign as it would have been in an historical or fairy tale adaptation. Realizing I was onto something exciting and challenging, I began to theorize about basic issues. I did not want to cheat those children who might enjoy the play most in Spanish. On the other hand, there would be Black children who don't speak Spanish in the audience. Furthermore, the Spanish-speaking children were bilingual and would understand the dialogue either way. I compromised by interpolating Spanish when it seemed natural to the action, rather than a repetition of an English line.

I was fortunate in acquiring a multi-ethnic cast, including three Puerto Rican actors, who, through a number of improvisational rehearsals helped shorten the play and fit the Spanish dialogue into it more appropriately. The short passage I read before now sounded like this:

Madeline

I love it. I love it more than anything.

Mas que nada.

Litterman

Then why are you running away?

I shortened Madeline's Spanish dialogue, keeping the emphatic comment, but eliminated Litterman's Spanish because it was clear in the action on stage that Madeline was running away.

The production was a great success. But I knew I had opened a Pandora's Box. I summed up the problems in this first attempt at creating a bilingual play as follows:

1. The appropriateness of the dialogue as determined by the characters and locale.
2. The placement of Spanish in a line: Should it precede or follow the English?
3. The very use of translation: bilingual speakers do not translate words or sentences; they use both languages, but not necessarily in a balanced way.
4. The time factor: In order to control it, the bilingual nature of the play needed to part of the conception of the play.

To deal with the variables I decided to write my own bilingual play. Since I had never written a play, I read some standard texts on Playwriting and Children's Theatre; but I also read more about bilingual education, and I observed bilingual classes. But perhaps most important, I spent many exciting hours in neighborhood parks listening and observing. In my field work I saw graphically the interrelationship between language and culture. I sensed that a bilingual play is not merely language, but also cultural modes of action - a young man, for example, expressing his manhood with specific strutting movements. I realized that I could actually cut out the Spanish and just deal with the culture. Yet the real people on the streets speak Spanish and I could not deny its existence. Based on my observations of, and involvement with, the people, particularly the young people- of the community, I wrote a rock musical for children called <u>What's Happenin', Man?</u> The action was centered in the West Harlem Community, the cast was predominantly Puerto Rican and Black, and the characters were identifiable members of the community: graffiti writers,

loiterers, winos, shopkeepers, landlords, gang members, and policemen. The play's theme centers on the need for artistic expression reflected in graffiti writing, but the play also dealt with boy/girl conflicts and machismo. In this play, the Spanish dialogue was more organic to the characters, with little or no repetition of the lines. This format minimized problems over placement of Spanish dialogue and also held playing time down to an hour.

Not all of the problems were eliminated in this play, but I felt that the technique was developing solidly. Of course, with the choice of a musical, lyrics had become a matter of concern, but the play was a marked improvement over Madeline Gimple in a bilingual sense. A short dialogue follows:

Rhonda Rose

Artistas Babosos! You guy are stabbin horses
to steal blankets. Jive artists! Todos Locos!
I'm going to give it to you straight: Tu Apestas!
You're a funky artist, man.

Group

Quien eres chiquita? Hey! Who are you
kinky babe?

In this play I took advantage of slang terms which often transcended formal language; and because there was so much spontaneous acting out of feelings it was unnecessary to translate lines. A knowledge of the type of language used in the community for various purposes helped me establish realistic dialogue. Children use languagd to play a variety of roles in their own lives.

Following the successful production of What's Happenin' Man?, I applied for and received a grant to do a summer program in bilingual children's theatre. With a staff of Spanish-speaking City College students in two elementary schools, I set up and supervised a creative dramatics program and directed two bilingual shows, one an adaptation of Beauty and the Beast (placed in a contemporary Barrio setting) and the other an original revue. The summer experience gave me more ofa feeling for the needs and interests of the children, as well as further practice in bilingual playwriting. But there wasn't enough time to write an original play.

After the summer, I became determined to write a uniquely bilingual/ bicultural children's musical whose theme would be instructive, but which would also be understandable through plot, spectacle, and character, to each child who saw it. To develop the bilingual approach, I felt I should appeal more directly to the Latin population. I thought - and still think- this appeal will aid the child's perception of himself. He will identify with the characters more readily, enhancing his self-esteem in the process. Before beginning to write, I spoke at length with community workers, teachers, students and children, as well as scholars, seeking information and insight into such cultural concepts as machismo, and dignidad, parent-child conflicts, prejudice, and the use of potentially obscene terms. I felt that a whole new approach was required in order to write a play that would be really meaningful to bilingual children. The play that resulted is a Latin/Rock musical called A Donde Vas? which will be performed in 1975. It makes use of native speakers of Spanish. The setting, a kind of trademark, is again 132nd. Street in West Harlem. The characters are composites of neighborhood people - gangs, merchants, etc., but the theme is loosly adapted from Everyman. Thus the characters are Barrio personifications of good deeds, beauty, strength, and so on. The music is heavily Latin, and one song is totally Spanish, as are many lines.

Those who have read this play feel strongly that language, character, setting, and theme are appropriate. Once again let me read a few lines. Demonio has come to "check out" Todo for the trip down during a dream sequence.

Todo

Vete Palcarajo! You think you some kind of demon. I'm gonna call my dudes.

Demonio

You got my name man.

Todo

Bull! (Calls out). Macho, Tia Amigo. Vengan!

Demonio

Oye Todo. No Pueden Cirnada.

With this play I think I have made progress both in providing bilingual/bicultural plays for children, and in developing bilingual education. I have begun to deal with the culture as well as the language, and in doing so have taken advantage of the educational potential of the theatre. At present there is virtually no body of plays that can be used either as instruction or entertainment for the bilingual child, whereas a wealth of plays is available for the English-speaking child. For the bilingual child, whose impulses are derived from the interplay of two cultures, I see my present work as a kind of refinement of the child's world.

Relevant questions still require answers. There is a need to determine what themes and ideas constitute bilingual source materials as well as what

manipulations of structure, character, setting, language and acting are needed for authenticity. Is it possible to determine what cultural values really belong to the Spanish-English population? Thus far, my writing and directing has been based in part on the assumption that cultural traits such as machismo or "conflicts over assimilation", do have a bearing on the success of the plays. But I am continuing to do research in this area at present. Ultimately, I hope that my plays will provide a meaningful theatre experience for bilingual children by allowing them to identify with their unique heritage.